

Congressman Chet Edwards Address

National Guard Association of the United States

132nd National Convention

General Bunting, Thank you for your kind remarks and for your leadership in behalf of the National Guard Association. General McKinley, General Hargett and Members of the National Guard Association and the National Guard.

As a Texan, I want to welcome all of our out of state visitors to the Lone Star State. As a Congressman, I want to thank you for your service to country. As a father, I want to thank you for making the world a better place for my two young sons.

For that I owe each of you a debt of gratitude that I can never fully repay, but I will work the rest of my life trying to make a down payment on that debt.

When I was a young Texas Aggie just out of college, I had the honor of working for the most decorated World War II veteran serving in the House—Olin E. Tiger Teague. Mr. Teague earned two silver stars fighting Hitler's forces in Europe, and for 32 years he was known in Congress as Mr. Veteran.

In 1978 when he encouraged me to run for Congress upon his retirement, he asked me to make one promise to him. I said, what's that, Mr. Teague and he answered, "Please never forget our veterans and those who serve." I don't make many promises in politics, but that is a commitment I intend to keep.

That commitment was etched in my heart when I was elected to Congress in 1990 and had the honor of representing Ft. Hood, Texas, for 14 years through 3 combat deployments.

Whether it was the service of our active duty soldiers or Members of the Guard activated for service overseas, I saw up close the sacrifices you made for country, and I will never forget it.

As a father who misses my sons when I am on congressional work for just a few days, I learned that for you who have answered our nation's call to duty, there are no makeup days for the missed births of your children, and no makeup days for missed birthdays, anniversaries, school plays and sporting events. That's one reason I believe the unsung heroes in our nation's defense are the spouses and children of our servicemen and women. For those in this audience, I say you may not have worn our nation's uniform, but you have truly served through

your daily sacrifices, and God bless you for that.

One cannot put a price tag on that kind of sacrifice or for those who, in the words of Lincoln, gave their last full measure of devotion to country.

Whatever we have tried to do for those of you who have served, in my book, it is never enough. Nevertheless, I believe our nation has a moral obligation to honor our servicemen and women and our veterans with our words and our deeds.

I am deeply grateful for the Minuteman award you gave to me this March. I will always treasure it, but let me say, I know who the real heroes are, and I am looking at them.

For those of you who are presently serving in the Guard, thank you for carrying on the legacy of the citizen soldier that predates the founding of our nation.

For those of you, whether retired or still serving, who are Members of the National Guard

Association, thank you for being the voice of nearly 500,000 Members of the Guard and their families.

This Association's voice is a powerful one and one that is needed as we try to do more to see that the increased benefits of those serving in the Guard better reflect the increased responsibilities you have been given in defending our communities, our states and territories and our nation.

On a personal note I would not be in Congress today had it not been for a true champion of this Association. Groner Pitts of Brownwood, Texas helped me win my first election in 1990. And, just days after my election, he had me in Brownwood talking about National Guard facilities, when his car phone rang, and he told me the President was calling. I said, the President of the United States, President George H.W. Bush. So, literally, my first conversation ever with a President of the United States was from the car of Groner Pitts, the greatest cheerleader the National Guard Association ever had.

For the past 3 and half years, it's been a privilege for me to chair the House Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee.

On veterans issues, I am proud we have increased the annual VA budget by over \$20 billion a year, the largest increase ever in any 3 year period in history.

We have funded over 3,000 new doctors, 13,000 new nurses, and 142 new community clinics. What that means is better quality and more timely care. It means more VA clinics closer to the homes of our vets.

We have doubled our funding for mental health care, and especially for our Members of the Guard and Reserve who don't have the built in support of active duty installations, we must do much more to recognize that sometimes the mental wounds of war can be as painful and long lasting as the physical wounds of combat.

For our Viet Nam vets, I applaud VA Secretary Shinseki for giving more service connected presumptions for those exposed to Agent Orange, and in the just passed Afghanistan war funding bill, our Subcommittee added \$13 billion to help our vets for what they earned over 40 years ago.

We have doubled funding for the homeless per diem program, but let me say this. We should not rest until there is not one homeless veteran on any street in any community here in the home of the brave and land of the free.

On the military construction side of my Subcommittee's work, I want to thank you. With your support, my Subcommittee added a new Guard and Reserve initiative that provided \$60 million in funding for construction initiatives of the Guard for Fiscal year 2010. Even better, just three weeks ago,

The even better news is that, with this congressional initiative, combined with congressional earmarks, our fy2011 Guard military construction appropriation is \$1.8 billion, which is the largest single appropriation for Guard and Reserve military construction since at least 1964. Let me be clear: we could not have accomplished that step forward without the strong support and leadership of the NGAUS.

As you know, though, we still have a long way to go on military construction. In 2007 it was estimated that the Army Guard needs \$1.5 billion annually in military construction funding for the next 20 years, and the Air Guard faces Military construction backlog of \$2 billion.

The bottom line to me is this: we cannot expect the National Guard to face 21st century threats and challenges while training in World War II era facilities that are outdated, undersized and under protected.

We are going to face difficult budget times ahead, given our huge national deficits, but with the costs of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closing starting to wind down, I believe now is the time for the NGAUS, Congress and the Administration to take make a major commitment to modernizing our Guard facilities.

I recognize that outside my Subcommittee's jurisdiction, you face the same challenges on the issues of benefits, equipment and training accounts. While I don't chair those Subcommittees, my family is the beneficiary of your service, and I will be a partner with you in all your efforts.

You truly are this conference's theme: America's solution. For everything dear to us as Americans: our freedoms, our security from threats abroad; the protection of our borders and our safety in times of natural disaster...the Guard is always there. Now, we must see that our nation has your back, in words and deed.

Winston Churchill once said, "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give." By that high standard, the Member of the National Guard, past and present, have led extraordinary lives of success, because you have given so much to the American family.

For that, I say God bless you and your families, and may God bless America.

